

Ruidoso News - November 6, 2009

By Dianne Stallings

At the suggestion of U.S. Rep. Harry Teague (D-NM), Ruidoso Mayor L. Ray Nunley testified last week in front of the House Transportation and Infra-structure Committee on local benefits from stimulus dollars.

As a member of the committee, Teague, who represents New Mexico's 2nd Congressional District, arranged for Nunley to testify on the progress of the Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant that serves the village, the city of Ruidoso Downs and portions of the Mescalero Apache Reservation.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided about \$3 million for the \$36 million plant.

Teague introduced Nunley to committee members before his testimony, saying, he was proud to welcome his fellow New Mexico elected officials, to testify about the impact wastewater infrastructure money from the ARRA had in his district.

"I ran for Congress not to be a voice at one of the political extremes, but to be a can-do worker, problem-solver and representative for the communities in my district," the congressman said. "Well, as soon as I was elected, Mayor Nunley came to me with a problem that needed solving. His town, Ruidoso, had been ordered to complete a wastewater project that would cost \$36 million dollars..."

During the question and answer portion of Nunley's testimony, Teague asked how many jobs the plant will develop over time. Nunley stated currently, 75 people work in new jobs, with between 125 and 150 projected once the construction project is in full swing.

Without the ARRA funds, Nunley said the village possibly could have borrowed the money from New Mexico Environment Department, but with the village's bonding capacity tapped out, the loans would have been outside Ruidoso's price range. He said ARRA funds really "saved our bacon."

During his testimony, Nunley thanked members of the committee for the ARRA allocation, saying the prospect of building a new plant "dominated out lives in the upper Hondo Valley for a number of years and...we now are under construction."

He explained that the existing plant is about 30 years old and its capacity is limited.

"The proposed new plant will have a capacity of 2.5 megagallons per day in Phase 1 and an ultimate processing capacity of 3.75 MGD in Phase II. Phase I is scheduled through 2015 and Phase II through 2030. More important, the new plant will have the capacity to meet Environmental Protection Agency standards of 0.2 milligrams per liter for phosphorous and 1.0 Mg/l for nitrogen.

"We are not aware of any other local government, state or federal jurisdiction that has both of these standards included in their (discharge) permit. The plant is being built to these capacities to meet the nutrient requirement of the permit (to discharge into the Ruidoso River), as well as being able to provide sewer service to the significant number of tourists and part-time residents who visit during the summer months and other holiday times."

Settlements connected to two lawsuits dictate construction must be completed by December 2010, he said.

The \$36 million price tag is being bore by a total population of about 10,000 permanent resident, a number that can increase to more than 35,000 people on specific holidays and weekends, Nunley said.

He listed the various sources of funding such as loans, added property and gross receipts taxes, bond issues, and rate increases enacted to produce the revenue to repay the construction debt, adding that the additional fees and taxes imposed are a significant burden to many residents.

He reviewed problems that cropped up during the process, such as the nitrogen limits imposed after the initial plant design was completed, and the required purchase of land from the U.S. Forest Service.

"While there were un-foreseen problems, the project has created potential opportunities that may provide long-term solutions to water availability in this part of the Hondo Valley, namely, water reuse," Nunley said. "In this type of program, effluent is intercepted along the main interceptor line, the solids are sent to the treatment plant and the treated gray water is directed to a series of potential users, including recharge of Grindstone and Alto reservoirs, aquifer recharge and irrigation of golf courses and other public open spaces. This type of system will allow the village to use the same gallon of water multiple times versus the single use paradigm in place now."

The reuse also would reduce the amount of effluent discharged into the river, making it easier for the village to comply with strict limits on contaminants, possibly eliminating the need for a discharge permit altogether in the future, he said.